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FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1959
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0403
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000864

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP, NEA/I

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/02/2018
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [PREL](#) [KU](#)
SUBJECT: KUWAIT SHAKEN BY WAVE OF STRIKES BY FOREIGN
LABORERS

REF: KUWAIT 840

Classified By: Ambassador Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (U) Summary: The GOK used force on July 28 to break up a series of violent demonstrations involving several thousand largely Bangladeshi laborers employed by cleaning contractors and immediately began the deportation of several hundred foreign workers. The incidents marked the culmination of a month of strikes involving these workers, who are mostly low-paid. The incidents have led Kuwait's media and a number of parliamentarians to criticize the GOK's stance on imported labor and to examine Kuwait's complicity in TIP. At the same time, the GOK has defended its forceful response to a perceived security problem and many Kuwaiti officials and business leaders have suggested privately that Kuwait's Bangladeshi labor population includes many criminal elements.

¶2. (U) Deputy PM and FM Dr. Mohammed al-Sabah told Ambassador August 3 that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MOSAL) would announce as early as Monday, August 4 new compensation guidelines and regulations for Kuwaiti "guest workers" to address many of the issues raised in the TIP report and by recent demonstrations. Dr. Mohammed said the GOK would address domestic servants as well, who are not covered under Kuwait's existing labor law. He asserted that the changes would be "real and not cosmetic." Ambassador urged that any deportations be based on individual misdeeds and not on collective punishment. End Summary

¶3. (U) The GOK's treatment of foreign workers and its stance on TIP drew heavy criticism from Kuwait's free-wheeling media and from a number of parliamentarians in the wake of a series of strikes by foreign laborers during the month of July. The unrest began on July 3 with a strike by some 200 mostly Egyptian contract security employees at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MOSAL) who complained of low and tardy wages and poor working conditions. This was followed by a July 22 strike by largely Bangladeshi workers at a number of Kuwaiti gas stations and by some 200 Bangladeshi laborers at Kuwait's Housing Welfare Office, all of whom charged that their salaries had not been paid in four months. The most serious incidents, however, involved strikes and demonstrations by an estimated 5000 largely Bangladeshi laborers at a number of cleaning companies, also angered over low and tardy pay and poor working conditions. These strikes began on July 27 and quickly deteriorated into violence against persons and property. By and large, the strikes have centered on the towns of Jaleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, south of the capital. The strikes, which continue, have affected operations at a number of government ministries, hospitals and the airport.

¶4. (C) The GOK's response to the strikes has been quick and forceful. Special Forces Anti-Riot Police and the Kuwaiti National Guard used smoke grenades, tear gas and blank

ammunition to disperse demonstrations in Mahlouba on July 28 and arrested and imprisoned several hundred demonstrators, most of Bangladeshi nationality. Kuwait's Ministry of Interior (MOI) quickly announced its determination to take strong action against persons fomenting violence and vandalism. Kuwaiti media reported and Embassy has confirmed that MOI immediately began deportation proceedings against many of the detainees. While the MOI has not made available information on the numbers of deportees, press accounts credibly report that, as of August 3, several hundred Bangladeshis have already been deported with some 200-300 remaining in detention pending deportation. (Note: The Embassy of Bangladesh's Labor Attache told POLCOUNS on August 4 that over 1000 Bangladeshis were arrested during the demonstrations and of these about 570 have already been deported, with approximately an additional 500 in detention pending deportation; some 300 have been released. The attache told POLCOUNS that he, personally, had witnessed some of the violence, which he said was sparked by a small group of troublemakers. The attache said the Kuwaiti police had made several reasonable efforts to encourage the demonstrators to disperse peacefully and return to negotiations, but had responded with force as soon as a small cadre of demonstrators resorted to violence. The attache said he believed the police had rounded up many innocent strikers along with some who had actually committed violent acts. End note.)

15. (U) Most of Kuwait's media outlets have rounded on the GOK over the strikes, with some noting that the strikes appear to validate claims of poor treatment of foreign workers laid out in the Department's 2008 TIP report on Kuwait. (Note:

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Several Kuwaiti newspapers on July 31 prominently noted that the Ambassador has said Embassy is closely monitoring the situation and urged that the GOK not lose sight of human rights considerations in dealing with the strikers. End note.) A number of parliamentarians have also taken the government to task and called for immediate action to punish traffickers and relieve poor working conditions. Bangladeshi complaints of low pay and poor treatment are long-standing. Smaller-scale strikes by Bangladeshi cleaning workers occurred in 2003 and 2005 but ended peacefully after MOSAL promised to look into their claims.

16. (U) A fundamental complaint of many of the demonstrators is over low wages. Many of them were reportedly contracted for a monthly salary of 40 - 50 Kuwaiti dinars (one KD equals USD 3.76) per month, but, in fact, most were receiving only about 20 KD, with the remainder fraudulently retained by the employers. MOSAL has intervened on behalf of the workers over the past month, encouraging employers to pay employees the full salaries due to them directly through accredited banks, but many employers reportedly continue to require their workers to pay the difference back to them in cash (or, alternatively, directly extract cash from the employees' banks using bank cards issued in the employees names). In addition, the banks charge the workers a 2 KD fee on balances under 100 KD. MOSAL and the Ministry of Interior are presently studying the possibility of setting a minimum wage for specific jobs and there appears to be some public sympathy for such a step, but it could be some time before the concept is enshrined in law. There does not appear to be, at present, any effective mechanism for preventing employers from cheating their workers.

17. (C) The Embassy of Bangladesh Labor Attache told POLCOUNS that his embassy, along with the embassies of other labor-exporting countries, is working to develop a comprehensive database on their respective nationals in Kuwait to better oversee their interests and enhance their ability to identify unsavory elements. He said these embassies are also planning to build a shared database on contracting companies in Kuwait. In future, workers will be discouraged from accepting employment with bad track records.

The attache said he has continuously sought better treatment for his nationals through MFA and MOSAL, but acknowledged that progress has been difficult.

18. (C) Comment: While Kuwait clearly has a long way to go in establishing acceptable working conditions for the bulk of its imported labor, it should be noted that the GOK's actions to deport a number of workers appear to have focused on those it believes were involved in violence and vandalism. Ministry of Interior officials told Embassy in recent weeks that they are particularly concerned about the presence in Kuwait of a large number of Bangladeshi laborers who they say have criminal records in their own country and possible associations with the drug trade; while others dismiss these allegations, most agree that labor brokers have exploited lax Bangladeshi and GOK standards to bring in excessive numbers of low-skilled laborers, whose frustrations and idleness have produced a combustible mix, particularly in the long hot summer months. While it is difficult to assess the allegations about Bangladeshi criminality, the GOK clearly feels it is justified in taking forceful action to counter a perceived security problem. At the same time, as noted above, Kuwaitis themselves -- in both the government and public -- are presently engaged in a close examination of their country's treatment of foreign workers and their own complicity in TIP.

19. (C) Comment continued: Embassy has long been front and center in making known its concerns to the GOK concerning poor working conditions for foreign laborers and will raise its concerns regarding this latest series of incidents as well. For the moment, our focus should be on encouraging the GOK to behave in a restrained manner and to deport only those individuals directly involved in violence and vandalism. We note, parenthetically, that so far the USG is in the lead in raising this issue with the GOK. The labor-exporting countries have, thus far, maintained a low profile. End Comment.

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